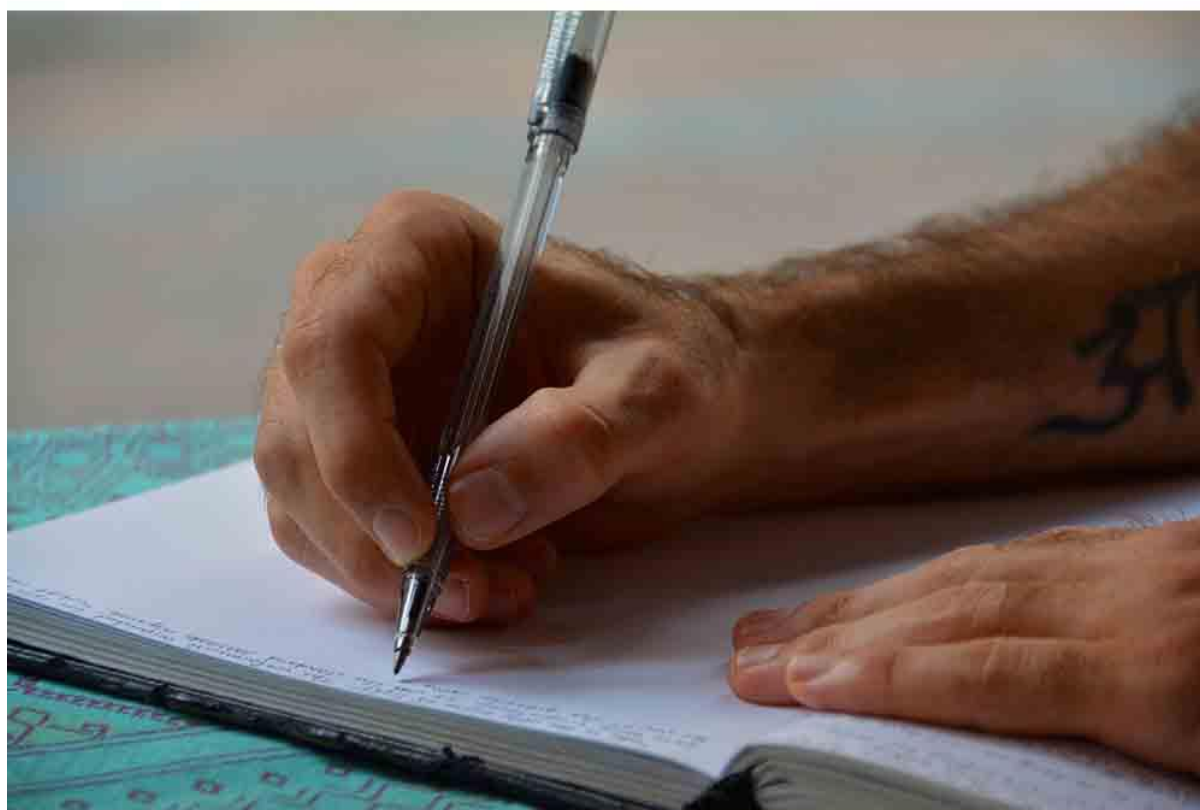


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P. Bindhu

Assistant Professor

Department of English

SCSVMV Deemed to be University

Ph.D Research Scholar at Bharatiar University

bindhu_paddu@yahoo.com

Dr G Ruby Davaseeli

Associate Professor

Department of English

Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for Post-Graduate Studies

Puducherry, India

Expedition of Asha inquest of Identity in Shilpi Somaya Gowda's

Secret Daughter

Abstract

Shilpi Somaya Gowda in her debut novel *Secret Daughter* throws light on the double face of India through the characterisation of the little girl Asha. This article studies the journey of Asha from the US to India, who in search of her biological parents and her identity landed in India with a hope. Her homeland receives her with the bitter truth about the plight of the girl child in the democratic land. The girl children are regarded as unwanted, burden, and neglected. As an adopted child Asha is in search of her real identity, yearns to connect herself with her homeland and with her biological parents. Her search unveils the answers for her

questions, which finally help her to strengthen her relationship with her foster parents and relatives.

Key words: girl child, journey, biological parents, adopted and quest.

One of the major themes of Postcolonial writers is the issue of identity in the host land. This issue rises due to displacement, fragmentation, hybridity and immigration due to varied reasons. Postcolonial writers represent the struggle and problem of immigrants in the new land to survive with the binary identity. Shilpi Somaya Gowda in her debut novel *Secret Daughter* documents the mental conflict of an adopted Indian girl's quest to know her real identity. Shilpi Somaya Gowda divides her debut novel into four parts; each part carries many chapters with unique titles, which signify ironical and emotional meaning. The First part of the novel covers the life of an uneducated rural mother Kavita's pathetic condition of delivering girl babies in the polluted society. In the next part of the novel, the readers are introduced to Somer, a physician by profession learns that she couldn't deliver a baby on her own. Both Kavita and Somer eagerly were waiting for their babies to enter into the world and to gain the identity as a mother because society perceives women get completeness only if they became a mother.

When Kavita delivers her second girl baby Usha, she is very firm in her decision to save the girl baby from her husband. Jasu wants a boy baby so that his son would help him in the fields, no need to give dowry for a boy child. This is the perception of the society towards the boy and the girl child. Both men and women in the society believe that the girl child will bring only suffering and problems to the family and girl child is perceived as the dishonour to the family. The girl child is neglected in the family as well as by the society, "She is underfed, undernourished, kept illiterate and burdened with marriage and family life even

before she is physically and mentally prepared to undertake such a burden. She is not only subject to neglect in the family but is also discriminated outside” (Parvathy 2240).

Kavita wants her girl baby to live in this world, unlike her first girl baby, “...a chance to grow up, go to school, maybe even marry and have children” (26). Kavita with the help of Rupa leaves her girl baby in an orphanage named SHANTI. The name of the orphanage symbolizes peace, it signifies two alternate connotations for Kavita, one saving and giving a new life to her girl baby, it gives her a sense of relief and on the other side, Kavita will lead her life in search of this peace by longing for her innocent girl baby’s face.

The name of Usha changes into Asha when Somer and her husband Krishna adopt the little girl from the orphanage. Thus the unfortunate life of the little girl takes a diverged path to fortunate in the hands of Somer and Krishnan as her parents. Asha has grown up in America under the love and care of Somer and Krishnan. But when the little girl enters her eighth grade, she is curious to know her past, her biological mother, the reason for leaving her in an orphanage; she wants to relate herself with someone who looks similar to her. Because her skin tone, hair, and eyebrows are unique in the land of America and vary from her foster mother Somer and she could not relate her features with Somer. Whenever she asks her mother Somer, about her biological mother’s whereabouts, she only gets the disappointing reply as she does not know anything about her biological mother, she just replied that they adopted her from the orphanage in India when she was a baby and brought her to California. Meese puts, “The child who has been adopted or placed in foster care may find that others do not readily recognize or understand his or her feelings” (131). This is evident in the case of Asha. At many times she feels that her foster parents fail to understand her, so she never shared her feelings and conflicts with them. Asha shares all her emotions in her secret letter to her secret mother as, “I wish you were here to help me. I’m supposed to write a biography of myself for eighth-grade social studies..... I’ve never even been to India”

(125). Through these words, the author brings out the emotional conflicts of a child who yearns to see her own mother in the land of America.

Asha's interest in knowing her past clearly revealed when she discussed her article for her school's centennial issue. She gives much interest to the institution's history and everyone has listened to her points with keen interest. She is interested to pursue the truth behind the past. She is eager to know the world outside. In an actual sense, she is on the verge to start her quest for her real identity.

In every child's life, the Adolescence stage is the most crucial one because this is the stage where the child encounters too many questions related to their ambience and appearance. This stage has been considered as the most turbulent one for both the child and the parents. When it comes to an adopted child the conflict is double. When Asha grows up she is very much interested to know her biological family, her parents' whereabouts, how her mother looks, she thinks, whether she inherited her eyes, dark hair from her biological mother.

The question of identity rises in her mind when she could not relate herself with her foster mother. Mercer states, "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (43). This shows the child's yearning for her real identity. Asha's quest can be analyzed in terms of identity, culture, biological mother, and double standard of Indian society. "Indians believe that children are like gods because of their innocence and purity of mind" (Tiwari 13). But in the same India the rate of infanticide is high. Even in the modern world, perception towards the preference of boy baby is still unchanged.

The little girl yearns to know her identity, her origin and also longs to visit India, where she could relate her to the people with similar skin tone. Asha's thick black hair and dark eyes differentiated her from her peer groups. That made her think out of the box and

when her friend asked whether she has inherited it from her mother. She could not answer them directly because she herself not aware of her real identity and her biological mother. Hall rightly states that, “Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses” (Hall, 10). Sometimes she has tried to hide her thick black hair, the author says, “Asha tries to wrangle her thick black hair into a ponytail, but the elastic breaks, snapping against her fingers” (133). Even her eyes are unusual eyes became a topic of chat with her friends. Her eyes, “...are so exotic. Did you get them from, your mom or your dad” (133)? These unanswerable questions bothered Asha. Whenever she encounters such questions she feels, “I don’t know who I got my exotic eyes from, she wants to scream” (133). She is not interested to share her personality with of the girls. The author says, “She doesn’t want to share her whole personal history with the perfect mirror girls” (133).

Asha exhibits her helplessness in finding her identity through anger over her mother Somer, who even sacrifices her career for the well being of Asha. When her willingness to visit India is rejected by her parents, the frustrated Asha asks her father “...Dad are you ashamed of me? I’m not good enough for your family?” (137). She starts feeling that in no way she is fit for this family. The author through many incidents registers the angst of a girl child in knowing her real identity. Asha spits harsh words on her mother as, “You don’t even know me. You’ve always tried to fit me into some perfect image of the kid you want, you just imported me into your little fantasy, but you don’t see me. You don’t love me, you want me to be like you, but I’m not” (136).

She also shows her frailty by hurting her parents with callous words, she says, “Maybe if you were my real parents, you would understand me and love me the way I am...why don’t you ever tell me about my real parents? You’re scared they’ll love me more than you do” (136). Her callous words extend to know her real identity and explode her inner

conflicts how everyone knows their history, identity, where they have come from, but Asha struggles with her unknowing identity. She screams at her parents as, “Everyone else knows where they come from, but I have no idea. I don’t know why I have these eyes that everybody always notices. I don’t know how to deal with this damn hair of mine” (137).

The sense of displacement pesters her and when she spits venomous words at her parents, she feels satisfied by seeing her mother’s pain-filled face. That urges her to sputter more sting words on Somer and Krishna. She vociferates her pain by saying, “I wish I was never born... I wish you never adopted me. Then I wouldn’t be such a huge disappointment to you” (137). As an adopted child she is showered with utmost love and care by Somer and Krishnan. Her foster parents craft their life around Asha. But they are unaware of Asha’s inner conflicts and her confrontation with strange questions that are related to her identity. This lack of awareness makes Somer perplexed when she hears her daughter’s painful words. The author says, “She feels as alone and out of place as she ever has in her life” (137). When Asha starts yelling all her inner conflicts and pain, both Somer and Krishnan could not reply and they are mute in front of their daughter’s urge to know her identity and biological mother. “...as children approach adolescence, they begin to integrate adoption into their identity and explore feelings surrounding their birth family and birth heritage” (Meese 131).

Asha also witnesses the same kind of urge to know her birth family, so she takes the project on poverty in order to visit India and her biological parents. With her stubborn nature, Asha has succeeded in visiting India to do a project on children living in poverty. Though Somer could not accept the idea of her daughter’s visit to the land of dichotomy, she accepts to send her daughter to India unwillingly. Krishnan understands his daughter’s conflicts and he is the first person to accept her wish, he says to Somer that Asha is, “old enough to make a decision. She can spend time with my family; get to know her Indian culture” (161).

Asha is very curious to know about her land where she was born and biological parents. She has so many questions that are unanswered that always haunted her through her childhood. The questions are like, “What does my mother look like? Who is my father? Why did they give me up? Do they think about me? (245). With the help of her grandmother, she reaches *Shanti* Home for Children to get the details of her parents. She learns from the Home Director that her given name in the record was Usha. The author puts it like, “Usha. Her name was Usha. Her given name. Given by her mother, Usha Merchant” (263). She collects enough information from the Director and returns with a swirl in her mind. Her mind is filled with multitudinous emotions after knowing her original name. She learns that she has her mother’s eyes, and a cousin. She even gets her parents address with the help of Meena.

But all her excitement and happiness come to an immediate halt after knowing that her parents have a son named ‘Vijay’. At first, she could not believe and accept the truth. But finally, everything makes sense to her. “Her real parents had a child, another child. One they’d chosen to keep. Her mouth tastes of sour acid. They kept him. Their son. They kept him, instead of me” (275). For years and years, Asha was holding questions about her birth and biological parents, she even imagines various possibilities for leaving her orphanage. But after knowing that Kavita Merchant has a son, it hits her deeply. She even stumbles and manages to sit on the step to overcome the shock that she never thought of. She feels, “it wasn’t that her mother wasn’t married. It wasn’t that they didn’t want a child. It wasn’t that they couldn’t afford one. It was just me. It was me they didn’t want.” (276). Gowda here brilliantly captures the mental conflicts of a young girl, when she learns that she is thrown out by her own parents, for whom she is longing for years and years. The ugly reality has shaken her trust and confidence. She could not stop her tears, she is in utter shock to face the reality of life. She thinks she feels complete, the day she meets her parents, but all those dreams

shatters after knowing her parents have kept their son with them and deserted her. The author says, “Vincent Road, has left her feeling ashamed and confused” (285).

She feels she is humiliated that her biological parents left her as an orphan whereas they are living with their son. She runs out of that building and takes an auto. When she searches for the money, she finds a bag of chocolates, which is her favourite; it was kept by her mom before she boards the flight. She starts crying louder after seeing the love, the care her mother Somer showers on her and how she hurts Somer with her toxic words. She realizes that she is wrong that she expects that her biological parents would be longing to see her.

She always thought they would be longing for her too. Her face burns with shame at how foolish she’s been...Her parents haven’t been longing for her. They don’t miss her. They just discarded her. All her dreams, questions and expectations are answered” (278).

Her inquest comes to end with the bitter truth. Now she loses interest to see her parents who discard her as a burden and redundant. “She put her forehead to the floor and weeps” (279) by holding the silver bangle that her mother left for her. She finds difficult to accept the reality, that her parents left her for being a girl child. The young girl learns about infanticide through her project work, which helps her to understand the plight of the poor children, girl child and mothers in the inequitable Indian society. This makes her to realize the sacrifice and the love of her foster and biological mother.

The author with her maiden novel poignantly brings out the conflicts of an adopted child, who all through her childhood longs to see her biological parents. In search of her real parents, she becomes blind to see her foster mother’s love, care, and sacrifice. Her quest for identity lands her in India to learn the dual face of India and her identity is unfolded and

explored. Through Asha, the writer projects the real strength of every child in India is the Mother who sacrifices her desire and lives for her children.

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